

Health effects of pesticides not 'acceptable risks'

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Byline: Cassie Barker And Jane Mcarthur Contributors Jane E. Mcarthur Is Toxics Program Director With The Canadian Association Of Physicians For The Environment. Cassie Barker Is The Toxics Program Senior Manager For Environmental Defence.

Body

When you take that first bite of a juicy summer strawberry, you might want to consider reform within Health Canada's Pest Management Regulatory Agency (PMRA). They have been tasked with ensuring people in Canada are better protected from risks linked to pesticides, after years of reports and coverage of the agency's failures to protect environmental health.

Here are ways the agency can better protect human and environmental health.

Reduce health impacts

The human health impacts of pesticides are not acceptable risks. For example, families of Ontario farmers who used the herbicide glyphosate experienced increased miscarriages and premature births. A case-control study in Essex and Kent counties in Ontario also found elevated breast cancer risk among farm women.

Studies document pesticides in pregnant people's bodies, amniotic fluid, umbilical cord and breast milk. In Quebec, pesticides were found in 98.7 per cent of children tested. Research shows that DDT - banned long ago - is still detectable in the breast milk of Inuit people. Pesticide exposure is linked to cancers, reproductive problems, non-Hodgkin lymphoma, Parkinson's disease and more.

Environmental justice principles should inform how we deal with pesticides, including policy based on mutual respect and justice for all, affirming the right of workers to a safe and healthy work environment, and a just transition for affected workers.

Apply planetary health frame

We are living in an existential crisis amid an escalating climate emergency. Chemical pollution has crossed a "planetary health boundary" - the capacity of nature to support human activity with pesticides negatively impacting soil biodiversity and affecting carbon storage abilities. Reduction targets, such as the EU goal of cutting pesticide use in half by 2030, should be pursued in Canada as farmers talk with the government about centring climate action and reducing emissions.

The Lancet's manifesto of "a planet that nourishes and sustains the diversity of life with which we coexist and depend," paired with the determinants of planetary health and Indigenous-specific knowledge-gathering methods, should be heeded. Recommendations by the UN and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission should influence the reform agenda. As Indigenous scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer says, we "demand an economy that is aligned with life, not stacked against it."

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Prioritize harm prevention

Safe, effective alternative products and nature-based pest control solutions are mostly sidelined in big agriculture, despite benefits to human, animal and environmental health.

The PMRA should embrace toxicologist Margaret Whitaker's argument that a risk-based assessment model "has the potential to promote the continued use of substances that at sufficient levels of exposure may result in adverse human health and/or environmental effects." An alternatives assessment would "inform the selection of less hazardous chemicals and materials so that the concept of acceptable risk is eliminated from the equation altogether."

As biologist Mary O'Brien has said, "Being a scientist means taking sides." The PMRA transformation agenda and Pest Control Products Act review should side with human health and the prohibition of hazardous pesticides. Health risks are incompatible with our need for safe food, healthy communities and workers, and a livable planet.

Jane E. McArthur is toxics program director with the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment. Cassie Barker is the toxics program senior manager for Environmental Defence.

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